

The Art of Ulrick Jean-Pierre

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“My belief is that it is most important for an artist to develop an approach and philosophy about life – if he has developed this philosophy he does not put paint on canvas, he puts himself on canvas.”

– Jacob Lawrence to Josef Albers, 1946

Ulrick Jean-Pierre was born in Roseaux, near Jérémie in the southern region of Haiti. He started drawing at the age of 4 and by the age of 16 he was painting. He stated that his first sketch looked more like a pig than the horse that it was supposed to be. Inspired by his uncle Louius Jean-Louis who was a sculptor, Jean-Pierre never put his pencil down from that moment until now. After high school, he studied at Le Foyer des Arts Plastiques in Haiti under the guidance of great Haitian painters like Lavorancy Exumé, his teacher and mentor. Jean-Pierre moved to Philadelphia in 1977 and attended classes at the University of the Arts (formerly known as the Philadelphia College of Art). In the early 1990s he moved to New Orleans where he was living when Hurricane Katrina struck. He was among the countless people affected by Katrina. He is currently living in Atlanta, Georgia, where he is in the midst of restoring his paintings. His studio was completely flooded and some paintings are forever lost. But, Jean-Pierre's spirit is high; he always says that he finds beauty in the midst of chaos and he is not letting Katrina break his spirit. Rather, he is taking this loss as an opportunity to begin something new. A griot is never at a loss for words; likewise the Haitian historical troubadour that Jean-Pierre is will continue to reflect and re-create even in the midst of change.

Ulrick Jean-Pierre is one of the most important as well as the most prolific of contemporary Haitian historical painters. His work has been organized primarily around series depicting Haiti's history, scenes from contemporary daily life, Vodun *vèvè*, and portraits. He painted a portrait of former President Jimmy Carter that is part of the permanent collection of the Carter Library in Atlanta. He was also selected to paint the portrait of Reverend Dr. Sarah Porter Smith for the permanent collection of the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia. In addi-

Previously published in a revised form online at <http://www.ulrickjean-pierre.com/Meet%20the%20artist.htm>.

tion, he has worked on murals and book illustrations. He has investigated surrealism and symbolism, and his early works depict events from Haitian folklore painted in a number of different styles, from Haitian expressionism to realism.

The work of Ulrick Jean-Pierre can be divided into five major themes: the social life series, the historical series, the vèvè series, the surrealist series, and the portrait series. Social life was Jean-Pierre's first series and constitutes the bulk of his work. These paintings comprise a powerful and heartwarming depiction of Haitian social life scenes.

Jean-Pierre is better known for his impressive collection of Haitian historical paintings that he created in Philadelphia and in New Orleans, many of which are featured in this portfolio.

The vèvè collection is a series of still-life compositions of Afro-Haitian religious artifacts. These are filled with mystical fantasies, rigorous linearity, and meticulous precision and detail. The surrealist series combines dreams, visions, and abstract concepts in complex compositions. These works represent a natural expression of the fantastic realism which permeates the culture of the Caribbean and has nothing to do with the European surrealism movement.

Jean-Pierre reveals his multidimensional quality as a painter in his mastery of the difficult art of portraits. Beyond routine technique, he manages to bring humanity, pride, and dignity to his numerous subjects ranging from beauty queens to presidents.

Jean-Pierre's work has been exhibited in national and international venues. In Louisiana, he has exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Center, Barrister's Gallery, Bergen Gallery, Gallier Hall, Dillard University, and Tulane University, among other venues. Jean-Pierre has won several prizes for his paintings including first prize in the 2001 competition, "A Tribute to 'Satchmo': Louis Armstrong Centennial Art Exhibit." In addition, Jean-Pierre participated in the 2006 exhibition "Common Routes: St. Domingue-Louisiana," at The Historic New Orleans Collection.

Jean-Pierre's paintings hang in private and public collections and in museums, galleries, and universities in the United States, Haiti, Canada, Africa, and Europe. His work has been featured in a number of publications including: *ARTS Quarterly Catalog of the New Orleans Museum of Art*; *Haitians in the Diaspora (Directory Book of Haitian Artists Living Abroad)* by Emile Viard; *D'or du bicentenaire* by Jean-Paul Lafitte; *Journey Towards Freedom: A Bicentennial Celebration of the Haitian Revolution*, and *Mystérieux dans la gloire (catalogue et exposition commémorant le*

bicentenaire de la mort de Toussaint Louverture by Fritz Daguillard); *Haitian Artists in America* by Shubert Denis, Emmanuel Dostaly Patrice Piard and Patrick Wah; *Haïtiens d'aujourd'hui* magazine; *Audience Magazine*; *Dialogue des anciens: Toussaint Louverture and Napoléon Bonaparte* by Gérard Bissainthe; *Gulf Coast Arts Review Magazine*; *Egypt Child of Africa*, and *Journal of African Civilizations* by Ivan V. Sertima; *Cultural Vistas* published by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities; and *Pour enrichir notre patrimoine* by Gérard M. Laurent.

His work has also been featured in international and national magazines and newspapers including *The New Orleans Times Picayune*, *The Louisiana Weekly*, *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Tribune*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Orlando Sun Sentinel*, *Le nouvelliste*, *Le petit courrier*, *Haïti en marche*, *Le matin*, *Conjonction*, *Le nouveau monde*, *The Creole Connection*, *Caribbean Express*, *Mid-Ocean News* and *The Tribune of the Bahamas*. His work has appeared on television historical documentaries including “Jefferson’s America and Louisiana’s France, Louisiana Bicentennial Exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art in New Orleans, Louisiana” (video 2003), and “Voodoo in New Orleans” (1996) by David Jones.

What sets Jean-Pierre apart from other contemporary Haitian historical painters are the metaphysical, spiritual, and cosmic dimensions that he gives to historical subjects. His passion for Haiti’s history has been a constant part of his work, his philosophy, his mission, and his life. For Jean-Pierre, creating art means documenting Haitian history for future generations as well as contributing to it. His work seems to say, “It is important to remember the past in order not to repeat its mistakes.”



Ulrick Jean-Pierre: My Mission

Haiti is a small country, roughly about the size of Maryland. However, its historical and cultural significance is an enormous inspiring treasure for me. As a legitimate son of this rich history and culture, through the sensitive lenses of my perception, I view Haiti's declaration of independence in 1804 as the restoration of humanity's dignity. The magnitude of Haiti's contribution to world history and socio-economic development of the Americas and Europe is often forgotten. Haiti was France's most important colony economically from around 1697 to 1789. As a result of the Haitian revolution, Napoleon sold Louisiana to the United States in 1803 because the French could not afford to keep Louisiana after they lost Haiti. This deal doubled the land size of the United States. This type of historical and cultural connection between Haiti and Louisiana and particularly between Haiti and New Orleans

has contributed to my inspiration as an artist based in New Orleans.¹ In 1804, when Haiti proclaimed itself as a new nation, it sculpted her place in history as a giant monument as well as a symbol of universal freedom. Today, the natural beauty of the hinterlands contrasts sharply with the stark poverty of some of its people. It is a country that constantly struggles to maintain her freedom and dignity. Its rich cultural heritage begets a variety of artistic expressions. Haiti presents a sense of charm, warmth and fascination. It speaks directly to my creative consciousness and reminds me of my sacred responsibility. My mission is to enlighten the youth and school children with the hope that they would love Haiti, their mother, and pass the torch to future generations. It is my belief that the historical painting series will show Haiti's contribution to world history and bring about awareness not only to Haitians but to everyone about Haiti's place as the first black republic and the first nation to break off from the chains of slavery starting with the maroons and continuing with leaders such as Toussaint Louverture, Marie-Jeanne Lamartinière, Boukman and Dessalines, to name a few. My paintings are also dedicated to the people around the world who love Haiti and those countless souls who are working to make a difference in Haiti. I remain hopeful that my paintings will invoke the spirit of pride and incarnate patriotism to rebuild our nation. For the past two decades, I have dedicated my efforts to researching and crystallizing Haiti's history on canvas. One of my objectives is to interpret and document the essential elements of my culture's native land, its history and the characters that help shape its society and religion. I see my work as a testament to the struggle for freedom and independence that Haiti comes to symbolize:

Through my artistic creativity, I speak to the love
The love of a land I'll forever cherish
Through my heart, I speak of a joy
A joy everlasting: of a great people of world history
And through my heart, soul and hands I present
A lasting image of Haiti for the world to see.

NOTES

¹ I wish to thank The Historic New Orleans Collection for their support of my work.



General Toussaint Louverture (Issuing the First Constitution of Saint-Domingue [Haiti], 1801). Oil on canvas, 65" x 89", 1986-1987. Collection of the artist.



Exchange of Culture (Between Indians and African Maroons). Oil on canvas, 24" x 30", 2005. Private Collection.



Battle of Vertières II, Hatian Revolution (November 18, 1803). Oil on canvas, 48" x 60", 1995. Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Michel Joseph Le-maire, Plantation, FL.



King Henri Christophe and his Citadelle. Oil on canvas, 48" x 60", 1993.
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Alix Bouchette, New Orleans, LA.



Mari Laveau (Invoking the Spirit of Love). Oil on canvas, 60" x 70", 2003. Collection of the George and Leah McKenna Museum of African American Art, New Orleans, LA.



Marie-Jeanne Lamartinierre (Haitian Revolution, 1802). Oil on canvas, 22'' x 28'', 2000. Collection of Judge Marie Bookman, New Orleans, LA.



President Alexandre Pétion Reading Bolivar's Letter. Oil on canvas, 24" x 60", 1992. Collection of Dr. Fritz Fidèle, New Orleans, LA.



General Jean-Jacques Dessalines (Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Army, Saint-Domingue [Haiti], Presenting the Flag, 1803). Oil on canvas, 24" x 36". Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Daniel Bouchette, New Orleans, LA.

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